

Allies and Adversaries, part 1

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Summary: After the Andalite attack, what will happen to the Humans and their Yeerk Symbiotes? Revised. Review!

Allies and Adversaries, part 1

(To avoid confusion, note that this story takes place in an alternate universe, which diverges from Animorphs canon soon after Book #30.)

Prologue

Earth was gone. Not literally gone, but unlivable for Humans for at least the next fifty years.

When news of the Symbiosis had reached the Andalites, they had come, but not as noble liberators. Their hatred of the Yeerks was so great that they would destroy anyone who befriended any Yeerks. The Z-Space rift around Sol had widened, so it took them more than a decade to get there, but eventually two Dome Ships had popped out of Z-Space and positioned themselves about two hundred miles above the North and South magnetic poles, just outside the Van Allen belts. Through some means still not completely understood, the two ships began to shift the Earth's magnetic field, literally stirring all the nickel and iron below the crust. Movement means friction. Friction means heat. Within hours nearly every volcano was erupting. In a few days, the Mid-Ocean Ridge split, and the seas became nearly scalding from the incredible heat of the lava seeping from below. New volcanoes began to form along all plate boundaries, and sea levels rose as hyperactive global warming eradicated the polar ice caps. The only calm spots were the Appalachian Mountains of North America, southern Siberia, the northeastern part of Africa, the Gobi Desert of Mongolia, and the Outback of Australia. And it was because of the geological stability of these locations that they had been the sites of the construction of the first Human starships.

By the time of the Andalite attack, it had been sixteen years since

Illim 341 and Amos Tidwell had come forward with their bold proposal for peace through Symbiosis. The proposal was accepted by a little over a third of Earth's population, which was approximately how many peaceful Yeerks were without host bodies. After Human ingenuity and adaptability were combined with Yeerk technology and raw intelligence, astonishing advances were made. Human and Yeerk technology advanced to a level about equal with the Andalites, superior in one aspect: Human/Yeerk craft could jump to Z-Space at relatively low velocities, while Andalite ships had to accelerate to nearly the speed of light first.

The Human ships were finished two months after the attack. By then, conditions on the surface were nearly unbearable, with temperatures over 110 F worldwide. It would cool off soon, as the planet plunged into nuclear winter. The five colony ships were the American _Victory_; the Russian _Svoboda_, meaning 'Freedom'; the African _Pamojah_, meaning 'Togetherness'; the Australian _Boomerang_, which would return; and the Mongolian ship which was yet unnamed when its engines failed in low Earth orbit.

All the passengers and cargo of the Mongolian ship were saved in a daring rescue by the _Boomerang_, which, like all the ships, had been designed for double what they were intended to carry: One Yeerk trait that helped Humans the most was their tendency to plan ahead.

Each ship carried a crew of two hundred twenty-five, Symbiotes and Solos; one thousand Human/Yeerk pairs in stasis; two thousand Human Solos in stasis; fifty thousand frozen Human embryos; and genetic samples from every plant and animal species that could be gathered. Four massive battleships, each of which carried a complement of forty F-39 fighters, escorted each colony ship. Not a group to be taken lightly. The ships were launched at the same time, and, after the initial difficulty, made their way, cloaked, to the edge of the Solar System, where they disappeared into Z-Space. They could only hope that the poor souls remaining on the planet would find a way to survive.

Chapter 1

We are Lieutenant Mark Ullin, fighter pilot in Talon Squadron, aboard the battleship _Cherokee_. Most of the stuff I'm going to tell you started with my Commander, Tobias Hawke. I don't think that's his real name; it suits him too well. Ullin thinks it's just a huge coincidence. We agree that the Commander is strange. He's a tall man, about 6'2", maybe thirty years old, with unruly blond hair and a wiry build. Now you've heard everything normal about him. He has this way of looking at you, like nothing ever escapes his notice. When he moves, it's with a jerking motion, like a bird, and you never see him for more than two hours at a time. He's never shown any hatred for Yeerks, but he's not a Symbiote. He's the best pilot I've ever seen; he seems to fly better than he walks. For a while I thought he might be an Andalite spy, but if he were, he would hate Yeerks. Then one day I found out the truth.

It started when Dan Onnid stole our uniform. Again. I would have reported it to my Squadron Leader, except for one thing: Dan Onnid _was_ my Squadron Leader.

{ I still don't understand this fascination you Humans have with jokes and pranks, } said Ullin.

{ I can appreciate a practical joke or two, I replied. But not the same one seven times! I'm going to tell Commander Hawke. }

I walked down the passageway to the Commander's quarters. Every living space on the ship is the same size. However, twelve men share each fighters' barracks. The Commander has his stateroom to himself. I pushed the call button beside his door and waited. After about twenty seconds with no response I checked the palmlock record beside the door. He was in his quarters.

{ Maybe he's in the head, } said Ullin. { No pun intended. }

{ I'll wait, } I answered.

At about that time I heard the door unseal and a voice from inside said, "Come in."

I opened the door, and froze. The person sitting at the Commander's desk was not the Commander. It was a boy, about thirteen or fourteen years old, with sharp blue eyes and unruly blond hair. The boy saw me staring, looked down at himself, and said a syllable someone that age shouldn't. Then he said, "Come inside and close the door, Lieutenant."

I did so, and asked, "Who are you?"

He sighed and indicated a chair. "Sit down. This will take a while." I sat, and he continued. "To answer your previous question, I am Commander Tobias Hawke. To answer your future question, I am not an Andalite. I merely have some abilities that are commonly thought to belong to Andalites alone." A look of inward concentration crossed his face, then he said, "By the way, I warn you that most people get uncomfortable watching this the first few times they see it."

He began concentrating again. At first, nothing seemed to be happening. Then I noticed that his hair was subtly changing color, fading to beige, then thickening and growing branches. He was growing feathers! Feathers began sprouting like that all over him. At that point he stood up in his chair. I forced myself to watch as his legs shortened and grew scales, and his toes melted together and reformed as talons. His arms twisted, the joints changing direction, and he folded them tight against his back. Wings. His eyes turned golden, and his mouth and nose exploded outward into a curved beak. I hadn't been to chow yet, so all I could do was retch quietly. His posture became stooped over, and he shrunk to a height of a little over a foot. Perched on the Commander's chair was a bird that I remember seeing almost everywhere at home: a red-tailed hawk.

{ It's still me, } said a voice in my head that was not Ullin. All Ullin was sending me was a picture of a horrifying blue monster with four glittering green eyes and a bladed tail stained with blood.

{ There's no way I could tell you my story now without you being missed at in the wardroom, } the Commander said. { There is no abridged version. } With that, he underwent the transformation in reverse, this time ending as the familiar Commander Hawke, in a royal blue jumpsuit with a brown hawk symbol on the chest.

"Go to chow, then report to my stateroom immediately afterward," he

said. "You are excused from drills this morning. Tell no one what you've seen. That is an order."

Chapter 2

I didn't talk to anyone during meals. I usually don't, anyway. Mess is simply ten minutes in which to eat our ration. It looks and tastes like tofu and avocado, which it mostly is, so most of our concentration goes to convincing ourselves to swallow the stuff.

Afterwards I went back to Commander Hawke's quarters and found him there waiting for me. "I spent mess discussing the situation with the Admiral. He authorized me to tell you something that only a handful of Humans and Yeerks know." I nodded once, and he continued. "Ullin, you were spawned before the Yeerk invasion of Earth, and have been with Mark since he was a child, correct?"

"Yes, sir," Ullin answered through my mouth.

"Then you will have heard of the Andalite bandits?"

"Yes, sir," he answered again.

"Only one was truly Andalite." He turned on the holographic display on his computer. Above the terminal hovered the images of four Humans and one Andalite. "Jake Epsa, Admiral of the American Fleet," he introduced, indicating a tall, serious man with brown eyes and hair. "Rachel Innon, Captain of the battleship Adirondack:" She was a tall, fierce-looking blond woman. "Marco Ossip, Chief Engineer of the Victory:" a short, stocky man with olive skin, dark, laughing eyes, dark hair, and a short chin-beard. "Cassie Ikklin, Medical Assistant aboard the Shenandoah:" a kind-looking woman with dark skin, short black hair, and brown eyes. "And, Aximili-Esgarrouth-Isthill, presumed dead:" The last image was of the Andalite all knew as the destroyer of the Abomination.

"We were the Andalite bandits. We were the only resistance to the Yeerk invasion force for almost five years."

I couldn't help it. "How were you able to morph in the first place?" I blurted.

He sighed. "This will take well over the time limit, so I might as well return to my natural form." Once more Hawke became hawk. The transformation was less nauseating this time, but my face probably changed color at least slightly. { You'll get used to it, } he said.

He told us about meeting Elfangor in the construction site and being given the ability to morph. Their battles with Visser Three, who was later promoted to Visser One. Being trapped as a hawk, then being given morphing ability through the 'noninterference' of the Ellimist. Their final battleâ€¦

He tapped a panel with his beak, and the image of Aximili-Esgarrouth-Isthill disappeared. { You wanna take over, Jake? } he asked.

The image of Jake Epsa nodded. "Be glad to," he said. I realized that

they weren't just pictures, but actual real-time communications. "Our last battle took place aboard the Visser's Blade Ship. Ax had written a computer program that would start an unstoppable self-destruct sequence in any Yeerk craft. We decided to try it out on the Blade Ship.

"We'd heard from an informant that the Blade Ship had a problem with rats, and the only convenient solution that the Visser liked was cats. We acquired different cat morphs, then waited until our informant found out the location of the Visser's new feeding grounds. From there we sneaked onto the ship with me as a dragonfly and everyone else on my back as fleas.

"I found the Blade Ship's storage rooms, and we all demorphed and morphed to cats. We explored the ship, acting like we belonged there, until it took off. Then we went into an empty room with a computer terminal and demorphed. Ax began uploading the program into the computer while the rest of us morphed wallaroos, which are like kangaroos, only about half the size.

"When Ax finished, we bounded toward the escape pods, but were stopped by Visser One and eight of his elite Hork-Bajir guards. We were able to get through the guards, but Ax had gotten himself into a tailfight with Visser One. He told us to go on, that he'd find another escape pod. When we left, it looked like Ax was winning.

"As the airlock doors were closing, we heard an announcement, first in Galard, then in English: 'Self-destruct engaged. Five minutes to evacuate.' After the doors closed, we demorphed and programmed the flight control computer to take us to our hometown, which was easy since it was designed to be used by Humans. About two minutes away from the Blade Ship, we saw it explode. We don't know if anyone survived."

There was an awkward silence, then each of the former Animorphs switched off their computers, one by one. Finally, the Commander turned his off.

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{ Get to the barracks, Lieutenant. I can get you an SIQ chit from
Doc. Don't worry, you'll be okay by tomorrow. Keep in training.
Remember, we only have three weeks before we reach Alloterra.
}
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"Yes, sir," I said.

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{ How about that, } said Ullin as we made our way to the barracks. {
A noble Andalite. }
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{ Yeah, I guess anything is possible. }
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Chapter 3

It was two days after my "meeting" with the former Animorphs. I had just finished morning mess and returned to my barracks to check my commputer for messages. There was only one: Report to Commander Hawke's quarters immediately.

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{ I wonder what he wants, } I thought as we walked down the
corridor.
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Ullin gave the mental equivalent of a shrug. { He's probably gonna kill us to keep us quiet about the Animorphs, } he said nonchalantly.

We reached the Commander's quarters, and I pressed the call button. The door slid open, we entered, and it automatically shut behind us. Inside were all the Animorphs: Jake Epsa, Rachel Innon, Marco Ossip, Cassie Ikklin, and Tobias Hawke.

"Mark Ullin," said Commander Hawke, "You know who everyone here is, and everyone here knows who you are, so we'll get straight to the point." He nodded to Marco Ossip.

The engineer stepped forward. "Well," he began. "This is about a project I've been working on for quite a while. It-"

He stopped at the confused look on my face. "Oh, you're wondering why I refer to myself as I. I'm a Complematch."

A Complematch is a Symbiote pair whose personalities are perfectly opposite. This produces a single mind whose intelligence isn't just the sum of the two minds, but their multiplicative product, capable of both logical and intuitive thinking in upwards of five dimensions. A normal Symbiote pair can combine like that, but only for brief periods. With a Complematch, it's permanent.

"Anyway," Marco Ossip continued, "We used to have an Escafil device, the machine the Andalites use to transmit morphing ability. To make a long story short, it was destroyed. About four years ago, when we started developing the starships, we realized that the Andalites were going to be an obstacle for space travel. They had already heard about the Symbiosis, and we knew they were coming for us. A Human is no match for an Andalite in personal combat, so we started work on developing morphing technology. We gave up pretty quick on duplicating an Escafil device, and eventually came up with something completely different.

"What we got was another example of science fiction becoming fact once we had the technology. It's a virus we call the Recolada, from Orson Scott Card's 'Ender Saga.' What it does is rearranges your DNA into a different pattern, in this case so that it can be easily replaced by foreign DNA. With alternate genetic material, provided by a recombinant DNA virus, and assisted by a Z-Space transport matrix and a mass-acquisition field generator, it's possible to exchange your DNA for that of another creature. From there, your body mass would be replaced by matter from Z-Space, assembled into the body of whatever you were morphing. It works beautifully as a computer simulation, but we haven't actually tested it yet."

"Why are you telling us this?" asked Ullin, voicing my thoughts as well.

"Because," said the Commander, "when you saw me in the wrong Human morph, you accidentally volunteered to be the guinea pig."

"Wait, wait, wait a minute," I said, making the kind of intuitive leap Humans are famous for. "You're making sure I'll never tell about you guys. If you test this thing on me, I'll either be one of you, or dead. Is that how it is?"

"It's not as bad as that," said Cassie Ikklin. "The Recolada won't kill you, I'm sure of that. We've been using it for the past three years to cure genetic disorders. The worst that can happen to you is nothing."

"If it's successful, you will have the same abilities we do," said Jake Epsa. "That's why we're all here. To prevent the past from repeating itself."

"What do you mean, sir?" I asked, in spite of the Animorphs' subdued looks.

The Admiral sighed, as if he were being forced to admit to something he himself wished he could forget. "Once, when we had the Escafil device, we used it to make a new Animorph. That turned out to be one of the greatest mistakes we ever made. I won't go into details. What you do need to know is that he became dangerous, but we were able to make sure he was no longer a threat.

"With that in mind, here are the two unwritten rules of the Animorphs. First, morphing is a great power. You've heard the cliché: 'With great power must come great responsibility.' It's true. Morphing can easily be abused, and usually with some very serious consequences.

"Second, we don't morph sentient creatures without their permission, unless it's an emergency. We just don't.

"Do you agree to these terms?"

{ What do you think? } I asked Ullin.

{ Well, from a completely Yeerkish point of view, the idea of trying out several different bodies is incredibly exciting. }

Yeah, but what about the risk?

{ Cassie said there's no chance of death. }

{ Okay, so it won't kill us. Who knows what else it might do? }

Ullin was silent for a moment. { I think the gain outweighs the risk. We're only a mediocre pilot. This is a chance to be something better. }

I'd been thinking along those lines, I'd just wanted someone to confirm it.

"Alright," I said aloud.

Chapter 4

From there we all went to the medical lab, where Dr. Snarweeya was readying the hyposprays. Dr. Snarweeya is what we call a denatured Taxxon. Taxxons look sort of like gigantic centipedes, nine or ten feet long, as big around as the average trash can, with dozens of needle-like legs. They hold the front third of their bodies upright. This segment contains eight pairs of lobster-claws; four pairs of three-fingered, chitinous hands; four gelatinous red eyes, spaced

evenly around the "head;" and a circular, tooth-lined mouth at the very top. Taxxons were one of the first species to be used by the Yeerks. They are very good at precision work and have extraordinary hand-eye coordination, so they were mostly used as pilots and gunners. Their only drawback was that they are eternally, ravenously hungry. They will eat anything, living or dead, even their own kind. Once the Human-Yeerk peace began, there were several thousand Taxxons left on Earth. They were kept in holding cells until one day a Taxxon ate his keeperâ€”and the cup of coffee the man was holding. For the next two days the Taxxon ate only enough to keep itself healthy, like most species. It became much calmer, and even offered an apology to the family of the man it had eaten. After the effects of the Taxxon's meal wore off, the studies began. Soon they were sure: Dipotassium phosphate (DP), one of the chemicals in non-dairy coffee creamer, combined with caffeine, acted as a serotonin inhibitor would in Humans, calming aggression and promoting rational thought. Now that they don't devour indiscriminately at the smell of blood, Taxxons make excellent doctors and surgeons.

"In for a Hush-Hush Procedure, eh, dearie?" said Dr. Snarweeya in a voice that sounded like an over-the-top impersonation of Angela Lansbury. Like terrestrial earthworms, Taxxons are hermaphrodites, functioning as both male and female. Dr. Snarweeya uses a speech synthesizer with a female voice, so everyone thinks of her as female.

"What do you mean?" I asked, hoping to take my mind off the possible consequences of rearranging my genes.

"I've been briefed on what I'm supposed to do. After the procedure and all the tests have been run, you'll leave and I'll get a selective memory wipe. Won't remember you being in here at all. There'll just be a big blank in my mind, and I'll know I've done a Hush-Hush Procedure."

"Have you ever done one before?" I asked.

"None that I recall," she replied in a tone that said she would've winked if she'd had eyelids. "Alright, now, Ullin, out you come," she said, holding a jar full of a gray liquid.

"Why?" asked Ullin.

"Well we can't have brain cells disappearin' and bein' replaced with you still attached to 'em, now can we?"

"Good point," said Ullin. "I'm coming out the right ear."

I felt the tickling half-pain of Ullin wriggling through my inner ear. After a few moments, I tilted my head to the side. There was a soft plop, and a drop of liquid from the jar hit my cheek. As Ullin left, he was replaced by the feeling that something important was missing.

"Now, then," said Dr. Snarweeya, setting Ullin down on a table and holding a large cup toward me. "Drink this."

I took the cup, sniffed, took a cautious sip, and barely managed to swallow. "What is that?"

"Everything that's good for a Human, concentrated and in liquid form. We call it Elixir. This one has an extra helping of calcium and protein. Drink up, now, you'll need it."

I held my nose and quickly gulped down the vile liquid.

"Now, then, duckie, if you'll lie down, on the bed, we'll begin."

I lay down, and Dr. Snarweeya pressed the nozzle of the hypospray against my neck. There was an icy feeling as it sprayed through my skin, then horrendous pain slowly spread from that spot. I clenched my teeth, and my hands were balled so tight my fingernails were cutting my palms.

"What's happening?" I asked from fetal position.

"Your body is rejecting the new cells. I'm sorry, but any painkiller might interfere with the reaction."

"How long will it last?"

"About three hours, but you won't be aware of most of it. You'll be weak afterward, but you'll recover quickly. For now, you'll just have to deal with it."

I heard the quick, scuttling sound as she moved away. I now could barely see as tears of pain blurred my eyes. There was a soft, comforting touch at my shoulder, and a voice said, "Mark, this is Cassie. Dr. Snarweeya had to leave, so I'm going to stay with you. In just a moment will come the scariest part of this whole thing. Just remember that it's temporary, and that I'm here."

I began to nod, and suddenly realized I wasn't breathing. I put my hand to my throat and discovered I didn't have a pulse, either. The sweat on my face turned cold as I tried to draw breath, but my lungs simply would not expand. My chest strained and my vision began flashing red. Suddenly my heart gave a lurch and beat once more. I drew in a great breath and gasped, "Whatâ€"was that?"

"Congratulations on your new brain stem," she said with a smile, though she looked as shaken as I was. "That was the worst of it you'll experience. Any time now it'll start working on your cerebral cortex, which will take about as long as the rest of your body put together."

Even as she spoke, I was having trouble focusing on her. She must've seen this, because she said, "You'll wake up feeling much better than this, I promise. Sweet dreams."

I started to drift off, but, right before I lost consciousness, I saw her face with perfect clarity. The smooth skin, the color of milk chocolate. The small chin and elegant jawbones leading up to finely shaped ears. The slightly flat nose and full, wide mouth, and those eyes. Those eyes like tea with sunlight shining through it. She was beautiful.

Chapter 5

I slowly opened my eyes, expecting to see Cassie looking down at me.

Instead I found myself gazing into one of the blank red blobs through which Dr. Snarweeya sees the world.

"So you've decided to join us, eh, dear? And how do you find yourself?"

I flexed my arms and legs, turned my head from side to side, and slowly sat up. "Okay, but a little weak."

"A carbohydrate Elixir should cure that," she said, holding another cup toward me.

In my weakened state, this Elixir tasted like the mythical Nectar. I gulped it down, and immediately felt almost normal.

"Feeling better? Alright, then, I'll just leave you to your friends." She scuttled away, and the Animorphs took her place.

"Okay," said Jake Epsa. "Now to test it. We've got DNA samples for every North American animal right down the hall. You'll choose which ones you'll get, but we want them to be useful to the team. First, you'll get what we call a battle morph. We need flexibility on the team, so don't pick anything that's already taken. That rules out the wolf and grizzly bear. Do you know much about North American animals?"

"A little, sir. I read Zoobooks and Ranger Rick magazine when I was a kid."

"Oh weren't those great!" said Cassie.

"Yeah, butâ€¦is there some kind of catalog of the animals?"

Jake nodded. "In the sample room. Can you walk?"

In answer, I swung my legs over the side of the bed and stood up. "Lead on, sir," I said.

The sample room was lined with small silvery tanks, with what looked like some kind of dispenser and a computer terminal in one corner.

"Cassie, you know the access code, right?" said Jake Epsa.

She nodded and walked over to the terminal. She quickly typed in the code on the keyboard (Humans never did like psy-link panels.) and stepped back. "It's all yours."

Hovering above the terminal were the words ENTER SEARCH. I typed in LARGE CARNIVOROUS MAMMALS. The computer responded, KINGDOM ANIMALIA, PHYLUM CHORDATA, CLASS MAMMALIA, ORDER CARNIVORA. It gave three choices for taxonomic families: Ursidae, Canidae, and Felidae. Bears, dogs, and cats. Grizzly bear and wolf were already taken, so I selected Felidae. That narrowed it down to two species: Felis concolor and Panthera onca. Beside each name was a three-dimensional rotating image. Felis concolor was a mountain lion. Panthera onca was a jaguar. I had read once that, pound for pound, mountain lions are one of the most powerful mammals on Earth. Well, they used to be on Earth, anyway. I selected Felis concolor.

There was a slight whirring sound, and the dispenser produced a small canister. Cassie picked it up.

"Alright," said Jake. "Next is what I call a door opener. An animal that's tough, strong, pretty fast, and good at wanton destruction. I'd suggest either moose or bison."

I typed AMERICAN BISON and pressed ENTER. The dispenser produced another canister.

"Now you'll need some kind of bird of prey. Iâ€" "

Without hesitation, I typed in NORTHERN GOSHAWK.

"I wanted to be a falconer when I was a kid," I explained.

I also got a water moccasin, bottlenose dolphin, mako shark, and great horned owl.

"Well, if that's everything," said Cassie, "let's get back to the lab."

Chapter 6

Back in the lab, Cassie Ikklin was preparing the viruses. "It will take at least an hour," Ikklin told me. As always when a Yeerk spoke, Cassie's features altered subtly, something in the set of the mouth and the muscles around the eyes, just enough that I could tell it wasn't Cassie speaking. Ikklin could just as easily have spoken without changing Cassie's face; she did it for politeness.

Marco and Rachel were explaining to me some of the dangers of morphing, and were just getting to some of the more spectacular examples of a morph's instincts taking over when Cassie announced that the viruses were ready.

I tilted my head to the side as Cassie emptied the seven hyposprays into my neck. "There were enough viroids in those for one of each to infect every cell in your body. That should take about forty-five minutes," she said.

"In the meantime," said Jake, "we can get him his equipment." From one of the storage cabinets he pulled a jumpsuit that looked to be woven of zoaluminum fibers. "This is the morphing suit. It's essentially a wearable Z-Space transport matrix with a low-power holographic projector. It runs off your excess body heat and responds to thought-speak commands. When we first began morphing, it could take up to three minutes to complete some morphs. With the suit, it takes less than twenty seconds. And it can also do some other interesting things. Marco?"

"Yes, oh fearless leader!" Marco's uniform shimmered and became a hunter green unitard with a black gorilla at the left breast. He opened his right hand, and from the palm grew a huge, double-headed battle-axe. "Pretty cool, huh? We can use the suits to draw matter from Z-Space and arrange it into any pattern simple enough to hold in your head."

"So doesn't that mean that you, at least, could conjure up a gun, or a Phaser?"

"No. For some reason I still can't figure out, it can only take an image from an unassisted Human brain. That limits it to simple weapons. Wanna try?"

I nodded, Jake handed me the suit, and I went into the head to put it on. It was a full-body suit, even with attached gloves, toe-socks, and a cowl and mask that covered the face. After I had put it on, the suit shrank around me until it was skin-tight, and the mask became transparent. I couldn't even tell I had anything on. I looked in the mirror and saw myself looking completely normal. Average height, average build, medium brown hair, blue/brown eyes, wearing a silvery jumpsuit.

"Good," said Marco as I stepped out. "Now, the holographic feature was originally intended to be camouflage, but we use it most of the time for fun—as a coordinated Animorphs uniform. Something I've been bugging everyone else about since we started this morphing thing. All you have to do is think about the suit looking a certain way, and it'll project a hologram two microns above the surface. Try it."

I thought for a moment, and the silver fabric turned dark brown, with a mountain lion in gold across the chest.

"I approve," said Marco. "You'd have to ask Rachel to see if you clash with anyone, but I think it'll do." He seemed to be pondering something for a moment, then said, "Okay, the weapon thing. It's like the suit hologram. You just think about the weapon appearing in your hand."

I concentrated, and, from the glove of my suit, like a fast-growing tree, appeared the hilt, quillions, and three-foot stainless-steel blade of an English longsword. I swung it around in a few experimental cuts, and found I could barely move it.

"Don't worry about it," Marco laughed. "It's a good choice, it just takes some practice to be able to use it."

"Alright," said Jake. "It's time for your morphing test. We'll go to one of the storage bays. By the time we get there, you should be ready."

Marco's suit changed to a standard American Fleet uniform, and I did the same, the sword disappearing into my hand. Led by Jake, the Animorphs and I set out.

Chapter 7

Five minutes later we arrived at Storage Bay Four. The storage bays are enormous, sixty-foot cubes full of plastic crates. Storage Bay Four was full of _empty_ plastic crates, making it the perfect place for the test.

"We're here for two reasons," said Jake. "First, to see if the procedure was successful. Second, to let you get used to the instincts of your two most dangerous morphs." Meaning the cougar and bison.

"Rachel, Marco," he nodded, then dropped to all fours as he made the

change from Human to Siberian tiger. Rachel became a nine-foot grizzly, Marco a four hundred-pound gorilla.

{ This is in case you get out of control, } Jake explained. { Some animal instincts can be pretty strong. Just keep in mind that you're Human. }

{ And one more thing, } said Marco. { I've tried to fix it so when you morph, your pain nerves will be the first thing to go and the last thing to come back. That'll keep you from feeling any of the changes. I think. If you feel any pain, just stop and think about being Human again. }

I took a deep breath, let it out, and said, "Here goes." I concentrated on the cougar.

Nothing happened. I said, "Well, I guesss it'ss notâ€" and stopped. My mouth didn't seem to be working right, and I felt like I'd had a full-body dose of Novocain.

"It's working," said Cassie from behind Rachel's massive flank. "You've already got the teeth and whiskers, you just can't feel it. Keep going. When you stop concentrating, you stop morphing."

I concentrated again, this time wanting to feel the changes. I wondered if that was a mistake. There was a grinding vibration as my feet lengthened and my thighs shortened. My fingers and toes seemed to be absorbed into folds of skin, as puny nails became claws. There was an ominous creaking as my spine stretched and a long tail shot out behind me, and my pelvis adapted to a four-footed stance. I could see my nose receding and feel my ears crawling up the sides of my head. My leg and arm bones thickened and sinewy strips of muscle layered onto them. There was a squirmy feeling as my internal organs shifted. A wave of golden fur rippled down my body, and I was complete.

I watched, smelled, listened. Sight was a little worse than Human, but hearing and smell were much improved. There seemed to be no sign of an animal mind taking over. There was no chance I would forget that I was â€" |

Cougar.

Or puma, mountain lion, panther, catamount. I had many names because, excluding Humans, I was the most widely distributed mammal. I ruled everything from mountain canyons to swamps, from snow to desert. My prey was almost anything that I could kill, from chipmunks to young elk or moose. I preferred deer, but I would take what I could get. I wasn't a very common sight, but that was because I was smart. I was confidence personified, but I wouldn't put myself at risk unnecessarily.

In front of me I noticed three different potential enemies. One was almost twice my size and striped. Another was a little smaller than the first and black. The third was huge and brown. I wasn't interested in fighting them, but they might feel differently about me. To my right was a stack of crates about fifteen feet high. I sprang upward, my front feet catching the edge of the highest crate and my hind legs following them in one fluid motion.

I crouched on top of the crate, tail twitching, waiting for the enemies to leave so I could find some prey.

{ Don't even think about it, Jake, } said a voice in my head. { You're way too heavy. I could probably climb up there without toppling the crates, but what if he wants to fight? He's got claws and speed on me. I wouldn't want to try a close fight with him. }

"Mark?" Another voice, out loud. Oddly familiar. "It's me, Cassie." I looked toward the source of the voice and noticed the other two creatures. The voice came from the smaller one. They looked defenseless, smaller than me. Potential prey. My hindquarters rose as I prepared to spring.

"Lieutenant! This is Commander Hawke. You are not a mountain lion. Remember flying?"

There was an instant of doubt. I could certainly leap, but I couldn't fly. Or could I? I seemed to rememberâ€|No.

"Mark, you're Human. Think Human!"

Human? What was a Human? Oh! Those smaller creatures! And I had the impression that all the other animals were somehow Human too. Of course. There was Cassie, and Tobias. The tiger was Jake, the gorilla was Marco, the bear was Rachel, and I wasâ€|

Mark.

{ Whoa! } I said, as if waking from a vivid dream. { What was that? }

{ We warned you, } said Marco, { but I guess we couldn't really prepare you. Now that you understand its instincts, you should be able to control it immediately next time. }

{ Should I turn back to Human? }

{ Not right away, } said Jake. { You should practice the morph, see what it can do. }

I nodded my cat head. I stood up, carefully judged the distance to the nearest crate, and leaped. I barely snagged the edge and scrambled up.

{ Try to let the cougar's instincts come through a little bit, but not enough to take over, } said Rachel. { It knows what to do. }

I relaxed a little, then leaped to the top of the next stack of crates as easily as a housecat jumping from one fence post to another. I jumped from crate to crate, higher and higher, then launched myself out from a height of about forty feet. I landed on the deck feet-first, my loose shoulders taking the strain easily.

Every move I made was easy, speaking of enormous power and supreme efficiency of movement. I decided to see what kind of damage this body could do. I padded silently to a stack of two crates and batted at it with one paw, claws extended. It left four deep scratches, but

that wasn't really _damage_. I backed up and took a running leap at the top crate, paws in front of me. The Duraplast crate and I rolled over and over, and finally stopped. I looked up from the smashed crate and found myself twenty feet from where I had started. I stood up and found that I was unhurt, but the crate was completely shattered.

{ Cool! } was all I could think of to say.

RAAO-oww-AOW! It wasn't really impressive or terrifying, but the cougar's hoarse voice was chilling somehow.

I rose to my back legs, and my golden fur was replaced by brown fabric as I demorphed.

"That was amazing!" I said as soon as I got my own mouth back. "After I got control it was like I was me, but I knew everything the cougar knew, too."

"Yeah, that happens," said Cassie. "It used to make me uneasy, but it does come in handy."

{ You feel up to another one? } asked Jake.

I nodded, and imagined becoming a bison. Marco had warned me that morphing is never logical, almost as if someone were playing a joke sometimes. This was one of those times.

I suddenly had a fully formed buffalo head on a body designed to support one a fourth that size. I fell on my face, which didn't hurt; that head was tough. The brown wool on my head spread down my body. A huge hump began between my shoulders, which rotated sideways to make room for the muscle. I barely managed to get my arms and legs under my ever more massive body. Then everything became thicker and stronger. I wasn't becoming an animal, I was becoming a fortress, a basilica of bone and muscle. I was a male American bison: over eleven feet long, almost seven feet tall at the shoulder, and weighing over a ton. I was terribly nearsighted, but my ears and nose made up for that. I was afraid of nothing. Nothing! Exceptâ€¦

I swung my ponderous head toward the source of the smell. There were three animals. I didn't recognize the first two, but the third was a grizzly bear. The smell of a grizzly bear meant something very important to me. A grizzly bear must be driven away, or it might hurt the calves.

I turned my body to face the bear, snorted, and rolled my head from side to side, displaying my dagger-like horns. The bear didn't move.

I stamped one of my front hooves repeatedly and tossed my head as if preparing to charge. Still no reaction.

UUURR-ahh!

With a thunderous bellow I charged, head lowered. The bear didn't move, but the smaller animal next to it rushed forward and punched me between the eyes.

{ Ow! } said a voice, as the animal clutched its fist.

That puny creatureâ€|had _dared_. To challenge. _ME_!

I plunged forward and, with a quick toss of my head, threw it over and behind me. I turned and charged, intending to trample it, but was hindered by a weight behind my neck. It was the other unfamiliar creature, hanging on to me by its claws, trying to drag me down. With a quick plunge, I managed to dislodge it, along with a large patch of my wool it had been clinging to. I was so enraged, it didn't even hurt. I resumed running toward the creature that had attacked me, but a blow to the shoulder sent me sprawling. It doesn't seem to matter if you weigh over two thousand pounds. If an eight hundred-pound grizzly bear runs into your shoulder at around thirty miles per hour, it hurts.

I scrambled to get up, but the bear and the animal with claws kept me down, while the smaller one held my head still by the horns. I struggled mightily, but the three of them together held me down.

Another creature walked to me and put its face close to one of my eyes. "Wake up, Mark," it said softly.

I instantly recognized Cassie, then everyone else. { Sorry about tossing you like that, Marco, } I said.

{ Eh, it's not easy to hurt a gorilla, } he said. { Don't worry about it. }

{ Okay, let him up, } said Jake.

I rose heavily to my feet, and began laughing. Where I had been laying were five fragmented crates. In fact, everything within about twenty feet, the extent of my vision, was completely smashed.

{ Did I do that? } I asked in wonder.

{ Using us as projectiles, yes, you did, } said Marco. I noticed two deep gouges in his chest.

{ Are you gonna be okay? }

{ Sure, } he replied. { This isn't really my body, you know. }

His features shifted until he was once more a short, bearded Human with no trace of injury. "When you morph, your body is pushed into Zero-Space and is replaced by one constructed based on the other DNA patterns in your cells. If that temporary body is injured, it doesn't affect yours."

{ Will your gorilla morph have that injury next time? }

"Nope, a new body is made every time, so injuries basically go away once you demorph.

"Now that we're sure you're going to keep it, I'll tell you some more about the suit. Like you've just seen, if you're injured while in morph, you can just demorph. Well, if you're injured in your normal body while wearing the suit, it'll reconstruct the damage. So, except for some kind of sudden death or continuous injury, you basically

can't be killed while wearing the suit.

"The suit picks up your thoughts, and can also transmit them to another person wearing the suit, which is how you could use thought-speak. With us, it seems to be a normal function of Andalite morphing technology.

"Morphing has a two-hour time limit. If you stay in morph for longer than two hours, you're stuck like that, which is what happened to Tobias. We've got a safety feature on the suits: If you don't return to your natural form within one hundred and fifteen minutes, the suit does it for you. It has a mental override, of course."

{ Anything else? } I asked as everyone else and I demorphed.

"What more do you want? Flight? Super-strength? I'm sorry, but super-hero uniforms only do so much these days," he said with a grin. "Seriously, though, I'm working on tactile acquisition of DNA, but that won't be ready for about a month."

"Welcome to the team," said Jake, shaking my hand. "Stop by the medical lab and pick up Ullin, then return to your duties. Remember, everything that happened and everything we've told you is beyond Top Secret. You may go."

Chapter 8

In the corner of the barracks was a big viewscreen, usually reserved for in-ship communications, or movies during our oh-so-common downtime. Right now it showed our new home.

It filled the screen, a marbled globe of emerald, cobalt, and swirling white clouds, turning majestically at waxing gibbous. As I watched, a shuttle flashed across the screen as it ferried another group of colonists to the surface, its mirror-bright hull reflecting the slightly reddish light of the star we'd decided to call Helios.

It looked almost like Earth, and was very similar. Atmosphere 72% nitrogen, 22% oxygen, 5% carbon dioxide, and 1% trace gases, with a sea-level air pressure slightly less than that of Earth. The surface was an even mix of shallow oceans and flat land, with a few high mountain ranges and rolling hills. There were three large continents and several island chains. Alloterra's gravity was about 93% that of Earth, which wouldn't take too long to get used to.

According to the probes, the soil was fit for Earth-type plants. The native flora consisted mainly of emerald-green moss and trees that were actually enormous vascular lichen. The land seemed to be dominated by huge land crustaceans, and flying reptiloids and things that looked like stingrays with legs glided between the "trees." The seas were full of fish and large swimming reptiloids.

The _Cherokee_'s orbit had taken us around to the night side of the planet, where I could see the faint bluish shimmer of phosphorescence from the oceans. What started as a sigh became a gasp as Helios burst over the edge of the planet like an enormous orange flashbulb, igniting the atmosphere with a fiery light before disappearing behind our ship.

Maybe this wasn't Earth, but I could get used to it.

Outside our orbit, where I couldn't see them, were Alloterra's two moons. Dead, airless spheres like Luna, though slightly smaller. We'd named the larger one Diana, and the smaller one Artemis, but most people were already calling them Big Moon and Little Moon.

"Alright, ladies," said Dan Onnid from the doorway.

"Yes, sir?" said Talons Seven and Nine from behind the partition. They actually were ladies.

"We're gonna do a close-range sensor sweep around the planet, then it's our turn to land," he resumed after the laughter died down. "All pilots to your fighters!"

We all swung off our racks and jogged to the hanger bay.

If you've ever watched the Star Wars movies, you'll remember the X-Wings. That turned out to be an excellent design for space fighters. The Hawks look like the offspring of an X-Wing and an F-16. Matte black. Four swept-back wings tipped with Phaser cannon facing forward. The wings and fuselage had sleek, aerodynamic curves for atmospheric flight, and recessed thrusters for maneuvering in space. Thirty-six feet long, twenty-eight foot wingspan.

I walked over to Talon Four, which had a small IV in white on the fuselage, and pressed my hand to the palmlock. As it read my hand print, another scanner extruded and identified my retina as belonging to Mark Ullin. A section of the hull melted and reformed as a set of steps leading up into the cockpit. I climbed inside, and the steps became once again a seamless wall of obsidian.

I powered up the boat and felt a faint nausea as the gravity-neutral field came on. The gravity-neutral field makes high-gee acceleration and high-velocity turns possible without injuring the pilot. I'd been trained for this, so I was able to convince myself that my semicircular canals were lying: I was not falling. Since Yeerks are used to swimming, Ullin had no problems with zero-gee. I attached the safety straps.

{ You should've done that first, } said Ullin.

{ Yeah? Well, you didn't remember either. }

There was a throbbing vibration as the air was pumped from the hanger, and, through the glastic canopy, I saw the outer doors open.

Tobias Hawke's voice came over the comm. "Fighters launch in threeâ€|twoâ€|oneâ€|"

I gently pushed the yoke forward and exited the hanger for the velvet, star-studded blackness of space. As soon as sunlight, or Helios-light, whatever, touched the boat's hull it turned a bright, burnished silver that wouldn't absorb heat. The canopy polarized to near-opacity and lit up with a holographic display of the other boats in outlines of green.

"Squadron Leaders, check in," said Tobias on the all-boat

frequency.

"Hawkeye Leader, standing by."

"Talon Leader, standing by."

"Strike leader, standing by."

"Talon Squadron, sound off," said Dan Onnid on the squadron freke.

"Talon One, standing by."

"Talon Two, let's go!"

"Talon Three, we're set."

"Talon Four, ready to fly!" said Ullin enthusiastically.

And so on through Talon Twelve.

{ I'm still wondering what kind of sicko thought thirteen fighters per squadron was a good idea, } I thought.

{ Well, Yeerks think thirteen is a lucky number, soâ€¦| }

Hawkeye Squadron is made up of F-39A's modified for shielding and long-range sensors. They don't have much in the way of weapons and speed, but they don't need them. Their purpose is to stay about five hundred miles from the battle, which is really just a respectable distance in space, and call out directions to those actually in the fight.

Strike Squadron's fighters are really nothing more than engines and guns with a place for a pilot to sit. Very fast, very agile, powerful weapons, but very minimal shielding. They were designed to get in there fast, hit hard, and get out before getting hurt.

Talon, my squadron, has F-39B's, like Strike, but with more shielding, so we're not as nimble. Our job is to be the all-purpose fighters. We're especially good at dogfighting, since we're still pretty agile.

"All fighters checked in?" said Tobias. "Good. Okay, Hawkeye, you do an atmosphere run, about sixty thousand feet altitude. Talon, you're fifty miles out from them, Strike at a hundred. Look for anything that shouldn't be there, then rendezvous with me at New Columbia. Go."

"Okay, people," said Dan Onnid. "Standard planetary search spiral, five passes, sixty miles altitude, four hundred miles between fighters. Sensors at maximum, cloaking field on. Let's go!"

That probably sounds exciting. It's not. Earth-type planets may be small as planets go, but anything big enough to hold a substantial atmosphere is HUGE. One trip around Alloterra, sixty miles up and at minimum orbital velocity, would take more than an hour. Six hours of sitting in the cramped cockpit of a fighter on a preprogrammed course.

We were trained for combat. In the sims we hadn't even bothered with sensor sweeps. It wasn't worth wasting the simulator time. Simple robotic probes could have done the job we were doing just as easily. So, inevitably, conversation began.

"I can't get over how much it looks like Earth," sighed Nine, a note of longing in her voice.

"Yeah," said Six. "That peninsula over there looks like the Yucatan."

"If it were rotated clockwise about ninety degrees and about a third that size," said Two in his slight Mexican accent.

"It would look exactly like home," said Eight, "if Helios wasn't so red.

Dan Onnid broke in. "Something to remember: for us, that star is the sun, and that planet is home. Now no more chatter."

He was right, idle talk would occupy the comm, which might be needed for an emergency. One thing Dan's good at is timing.

A frantic voice came over the all-boat freke. "Mayday! This is Hawkeye Seven. I've spotted a Blade Ship, repeat, a Blade Ship. They've seen me! Ohâ€" "

There came a tremendous explosion of noise, then, "Assistâ€|hitâ€|-ing down, need resq-â€|" and silence.

I set the controls for a direct mental interface and prepared to make the jump.

{ You wanted combat, } said Ullin. { Let's make it good! }

Chapter 9

Ullin and I merged, and suddenly, with no transition, there was no Ullin and there was no I. We were Human, Yeerk, both, and neither. We simply were.

We willed the boat to move in the kata direction, and it was as if a curtain were ripped away. We could see odd, bulbous shapes writhing around us, but we ignored them and concentrated on the 3-D universe. It was tiny, yet huge. There was no point of reference, since everything in it was the same distance away: none.

We saw strange, unknown peoples on distant planets, going about activities that meant nothing to us. Stars were being born, and stars were dying. On Earth, Humans were living in underground caverns, growing crops under artificial lights, assisted by Hork-Bajir and dog-like robots of white plastic and silvery metal. And on Alloterra, Hawkeye Squadron battled a large ship shaped like a battle-ax. But we couldn't reach them yet.

Under our guidance, the boat moved in that nameless direction that's perpendicular to up-down, left-right, forward-back, and ana-kata. We could now see everything from the inside, outside, and all angles at once. That didn't make sense, so we concentrated on what did: the space-time strands.

Every intelligent being in the universe affects space-time along a set of points. In five-dimensional space it's possible to travel to any point along any of those lines.

We quickly found the strand representing Hawkeye Seven and followed it to the point where/when they spotted the Blade Ship. From there we dropped back into Three-Space.

We popped in about sixty thousand feet above and twenty miles to the east of New Brisbane at exactly the time we had left Three-Space. We were just in time to see Hawkeye Seven establish a stable glide path that would land him safely in the foothills of the Dividing Range.

Upon touching air, the engines switched from fusion-ion propulsion to rapid pulse-fed ramjets, and the boat's skin darkened to black to deal with kinetic heating. I saw forty craft the same color. The boats of Hawkeye Squadron, minus Seven, were scattered in the distance, approaching through normal space. Arranged in a rough sphere were Talon and Strike Squadrons. In the center of the sphere was a ship about five times the size of our fighters, almost two hundred feet long. The bridge section was a hard-edged diamond, with a long neck connecting it to the main body. It had two scimitar wings swept to points at the stern. The overall effect was of some formidable ancient weapon, specifically a battle-axe.

I reviewed in my mind everything I knew about Blade Ships. While not even a fourth the size of a Human Battleship, they packed almost as much firepower, and their smaller size made them more maneuverable. Their shields were pretty weak, since a strong force field that size would be too much of an energy drain. They were very fast, though not made for atmosphere.

{ In other words, they don't stand a chance, } said Ullin.

Suddenly, another boat appeared on the horizon and approached very quickly, moving to the interior of the sphere. It was half again as big as the one I flew, but basically the same. A Commander's fighter.

"This is Commander Tobias Hawke," he said on the all-call. "Blade Ship, you are surrounded and outnumbered. I recommend you surrender."

In reply, the Blade Ship's forward Dracon cannon fired a red beam of hard light at Tobias' boat. Its shield shimmered as it absorbed the energy of the blast.

"Well, that was rude. I guess we'll have to disable them."

Within fifteen seconds, all five of the Blade Ship's Dracon cannon were in smoking ruin, along with the exterior sensor arrays. Ullin and I got the cannon under the left wing.

"Okay, Talon Four and I will board. Everyone else, keep your distance and keep watch," said Tobias.

We snugged our fighters up against the twin docking ports. An aperture opened in the side of the cockpit, and I stepped onto the

Blade Ship.

I made my suit shift to match the flat gray of the Blade Ship's interior, and looked around. I saw no one. I crept along, carefully avoiding direct light: a shadow would expose us.

{ Mark Ullin, can you hear me? } asked Tobias, using the suits' version of thought-speak.

{ Yeah, we're here, } I said. { We're in the corridor outside the docking port. }

{ And I'm in the other one. I've been in one of these things before, so I know that these corridors meet right outside the bridge. Just keep walking until you reach the end. }

We got to the end of the corridor and waited. Pretty soon Ullin and I saw a vague suggestion of a man-shape coming toward us.

{ Tobias, is that you? } I asked.

{ Yeah. Listen, I've got a Hork-Bajir morph. I'll do that and act like I've captured you. When I tell you, have your suit give a leptic pulse. It won't affect me, since I'll have my eyes closed. Okay? }

{ Okay. }

With that, we saw Tobias clearly, but only for a moment as he shrank down to a red-tailed hawk. Then he began the Hork-Bajir morph.

The talons and beak went almost unchanged, but everything else didn't. He shot up to a height of about seven feet. Feathers disappeared and became leathery green-black hide. His wings rotated around and became long, massively muscled arms. Blades grew from his wrists, elbows, and knees, and two sword-like horns grew from his forehead.

He pinned my arms behind me and held them there with one huge, four-fingered hand, and held the other wrist blade to my throat.

"Move, Human," he said in a rough, reptilian voice. We marched to the bridge.

When we arrived at the door to the bridge, Ullin reminded me to shift my suit to a standard American Fleet uniform, and Tobias pressed the panel to open the door and shoved me through.

Perversely, the room looked almost exactly like the bridge of the starship Enterprise. Except, of course, that the work stations around the perimeter were manned by Taxxons and Hork-Bajir as well as Humans, and the throne-like chair in the center of the room was occupied by a monstrosously huge Hork-Bajir.

"Haj?" said the captain.

Tobias replied at length in what I recognized as Galard, but didn't understand. (We still don't know how the Andalites make those wonderful universal translators.) He squeezed my wrists a little tighter, and I told my suit to make a leptic pulse.

A leptic pulse is simply a light strobing at the precise sequence that renders just about anything with eyes unconscious. It's a very simple weapon, and therefore very hard to counter.

Everything on the bridge instantly slumped, except for Ullin and I, Tobias and the captain. He must've blinked! With speed that was astonishing even for a Hork-Bajir, he sprang forward and, with a wrist blade, cut Tobias' hamstrings, which face forward in a Hork-Bajir. As Tobias collapsed, and the captain turned to face me, rising to his full height of almost eight feet.

I materialized a Scottish claymore and held it ready. The Hork-Bajir made a low wuffing sound that I took for laughter. He swung a wrist blade toward me, which I parried. Another swipe was blocked by my sword. I tried a one-handed thrust, but my blade was knocked aside, and I received two slashes across the belly before I could even think.

Before my intestines had a chance to spill out, the zoaluminum of my suit liquefied and ran silver to cover the sliced flesh. There was an itching sensation as my interrupted nerves and blood vessels found new pathways through restored muscle, fat, and skin. Within six seconds there was no trace of injury.

I'm not very good at reading Hork-Bajir facial expressions, but I think the captain was angry.

"Think you invincible, ghafrash?" he bellowed. "You not montig this, I think!"

As he was about to strike, I swung my sword so the tip scratched one of his head blades: one of the most sensitive parts of Hork-Bajir anatomy. A cheap shot.

The huge alien roared in pain, regained his control. With a mighty swipe of his arm, the captain knocked my weapon from my hands. He was about to strike at my head, then suddenly went limp. Tobias, in Human morph, pulled a huge, crescent-shaped weapon from the captain's back.

"Thanks," I said. "What is that?"

"Ever watch Star Trek? This is a Klingon weapon, called a bat'leth. And my aunt said that show was useless."

The bat'leth vanished into Tobias' hand, and I picked up the claymore and absorbed it into my suit.

"Ullin," said Tobias. "Program the ship's interior lights for a five-second leptic pulse"

Ullin did so. "Close your eyes, sir."

After a moment, the internal sensors detected only three conscious thought patterns: Tobias, Ullin, and me. Tobias turned a dial and placed his hand on a panel. "All fighters, this is Commander Hawke. The Blade Ship is secure. We will land the ship on the island in the Impact Sea. Strike Squadron will stay to guard the prisoners. I will then proceed to New Brisbane to arrange for more permanent lodging

for our guests."

"Acknowledged," said the three Squadron Leaders.

The flight to the island was uneventful, probably because it took only twelve minutes. After we landed, the pilots carried the Controllers out. Let me tell you, carrying an unconscious Hork-Bajir or Taxxon can be very tricky. One of the Hawkeye pilots had flown a Blade Ship before Symbiosis, so she flew it to New Columbia, escorted by Talon and the Hawkeye pilots who hadn't been disabled in the fight.

Colonists had been coming to New Columbia for the past three days. The temporary houses that had been set up would have to last for at least fifteen or twenty years, until Earth-type trees could grow large enough for lumber. The native lichen-trees crumbled to dust within hours of being cut down, so they were useless as building materials. But the sturdy prefab plastic shelters could last fifty years if they had to.

The cloaked Blade Ship landed under a lake near the city, where it most likely wouldn't be disturbed. We landed the fighters outside our new barracks, and went inside.

The barracks was tiny and cramped, the walls lined with bunks that looked more like shelves. We were used to that. What did disappoint me was our bunk assignment: bottom bunk, by the door. The most undesirable spot in the entire barracks.

{ Still, I guess it makes sense if we're needed for some kind of special assignment. }

Ullin made a mental gesture that meant the same as a nod.

It was local evening, so I decided that, even if I had woken up only three hours before, it would be a good idea to get some rack time.

Chapter 10

After a few hours, my theory was proved correct: Ullin and I were by the door so they could wake us easily.

I woke to Tobias shaking my shoulder. He made a "follow me" gesture, which I obeyed. He led us into one of the shuttles, and closed the hatch once we were inside. In the passenger section were the other Animorphs, plus three people I hadn't met: a Human, a Hork-Bajir, and an Andalite.

Ullin twisted my face into a look of disgust even as I said happily, "Aximili-Esgarrouth-Isthill!" I stared at the adolescent Andalite, who looked as if he could've killed Visser One yesterday. "Have you been in stasis?"

{ Only for the past four months, } he said. { I have a very complicated story to tell, which is why you were called here. }

"Actually, all three of us have a complicated story to tell," said the new Human. He was a strange-looking man, strong and lean,

obviously a fighter, but with a face that looked effeminate in spite of the beard. "We are Phillip Dirran," he said, introducing himself and his Symbiote partner.

Ullin spoke up. "When you said all three, did you mean Aximili, Dirran, and yourself?"

Phillip started to answer, but was interrupted by the Hork-Bajir. "I am here only because I was told of enslaved Hork-Bajir on this planet, and I wish to learn more. I am Toby Hamee," she added. Ullin recognized her as female because she had two head-blades instead of three. I noticed something else. She was muscular and tall, easily topping seven feet, like the rest of her species. The difference was in her eyes. They were bright, not dull like those of the average Hork-Bajir. Behind those eyes was a mind as hard and sharp as the blades that covered her body. She was probably more intelligent than I, and I am far from stupid.

"I'll tell the story," said Phillip. "no, Dirran: the eyes had become a little tighter, the mouth less relaxed. "Ready?" And he began.

End
file.